

**Queering the Sacred:
Notes for a Typology of Gay Spirituality**

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As scholars of religion, one of our most compelling and daunting tasks is to seek simplicity and clarity in the midst of abundance. The object of our study -- and also of our love -- is, by its very nature, somewhat overwhelming and amorphous in its manifestations. We value the religious experience, and we take it seriously. Of course, we allow it to speak for itself. But we also seek to understand, and this is what I hope to do today: understand through a process of ordering.

To many of us, the idea of proposing a typology of any sort may seem somewhat old-fashioned, and I admit it is. It smacks of a certain positivistic nostalgia, and I am even prepared to concede you this. It is also a daunting task, ripe with pitfalls and open to serious questioning of core assumptions -- for one person's order may be another's disorder. I am intensely conscious of this. My task, in fact, is a bit more modest in scope. I take my cue from the definition of typology in my trusty Concise Oxford Dictionary, which reads: "Study and interpretation of (esp. biblical) types." I would think that the word "biblical," which is placed in parentheses, is not accidental here. It already hints at the need for us to comprehend the sacred by means of putting order onto it, a very biblical task if ever there was one.

I therefore intend to attempt to understand -- to make sense of, to put order into -- the vast and growing field of gay spirituality. I believe this is something necessary and useful. I will do so by offering a very preliminary and modest framework -- essentially a sociological one -- for discerning the many-coloured variations and forms of this spirituality. I should mention here that my focus is on gay male spirituality. I make no pretense in reflecting the unique concerns and themes found in lesbian spirituality, or that, beginning to emerge, which echos the experience of bisexual and transgendered persons.

I have entitled my paper "Queering the Sacred," because this is precisely what gay spirituality does: it gives the sacred a queer face; it defines the holy in terms of our common experience as gay men. It is therefore appropriate for us to ask ourselves why we feel we need a spirituality of our own. I do not mean

this to be a flippant or irrelevant question. I believe it is one we must seek to answer with the utmost seriousness before we can set about our ordering task. Allow me briefly to propose two possible answers: one theological; the other more mundanely sociological.

All human experience needs an ultimate reference point, and I do not think gay men are any different in this regard. Our joys and sorrows, our lives and relationships, our ways of celebrating and our ways of dying: all these require some meaningful interpretive framework, some "bigger picture" within which our limited humanity makes sense. We encounter the religious wherever human beings crave and create meaning. This is what all spiritualities -- including those we call gay -- are about: the carving of meaning, the bringing forth of transcendence, the ultimate wrestling with the angel. This is primarily why there exists a gay spirituality, a queer theology if you will: because, very simply, we need gods like other humans need gods. And even if the god is noticeably absent, as J. Michael Clark reminds us in his most recent book, there is still hope in our defiance as individuals and as a community.

But I am a sociologist, and therefore have the disadvantage of being a bit more prosaic in my explanations. It is critical, I believe, that we understand full well the intimate connection between our oppression and the emergence of our spirituality. We are all intensely conscious, personally and collectively, of the disdain in which we have been held by organized religion throughout history. Our political oppression has its source in the oppression of scripture. I view the blossoming of gay spirituality as a classic example of the positive recuperation, by the victim and the outsider, of the religious discourse of rejection and intolerance -- much as we may opt to call ourselves "faggot" or "queer," or wear the pink triangle with pride. In choosing to define ourselves as persons with a spiritual life and a language with which to express it, we are staking claim to one of the most powerful and persuasive instruments of social and political legitimacy, that of religion. And in so doing, not only do we attempt to neutralize the sting of religious righteousness, we also create a parallel religious and theological discourse of inclusion and acceptance.

Before proposing a typology of gay spirituality, we need to take a bird's-eye view of the development of this spirituality, highlighting some of its more salient characteristics. Though only a summary overview, this will help place our subsequent discussion within a broader historical context. I would suggest that, for ease of understanding, we divide this development into three readily identifiable periods: pre-Stonewall, post-Stonewall, and the advent of AIDS and its aftermath. I choose Stonewall as a marker because of its unique position as the mythic foundational event of contemporary gay liberation.

Gay spirituality in the pre-Stonewall period, I would argue, was more akin to the countercultural beliefs which were normative in the Sixties, combining an emphasis on such elements as androgyny, Native American traditions, California-based therapeutic rituals, the New Age and other similar themes and movements. It was not explicitly or deliberately religious. Rather, it partook of the general search for a unique form of spiritual consciousness transcending generational and gender-based distinctions. Within this search, the quest for the emancipation of the homosexual was to be one among many different forms of human liberation. Even today, this strain of gay spirituality remains very much present and influential, enough to constitute a type in and of itself. It is not merely coincidental, for example, that the founders of the earliest gay rights organizations should be so heavily involved with groups such as the Radical Faeries.

The post-Stonewall era saw the development of organized religious institutions geared specifically to the spiritual needs of gays and lesbians. The Metropolitan Community Church, even though it was founded in 1968, and the flourishing of such groups as the Roman Catholic "Dignity" and the Anglican "Integrity," are examples of this. It is during this period that many ground-breaking historical and theological works by gay authors were published. Several of these were instrumental in the development of a uniquely gay perspective on the Christian tradition, particularly in their elaboration of alternate readings of controversial scriptural passages. The overall effort during this time focused more on a recuperation of organized religion, most notably through the creation of parallel religious structures and institutions, and on a critical

re-reading of the Bible in light of the gay experience.

It is undeniably the AIDS crisis which has had the most significant and vigorous effect on the quest for a gay spirituality, and understandably so. The immediacy and impact of death as a tragic personal and collective experience, and its dramatic association with the sexual life-force, the tearing apart of our relationships and loves, the naked and terrifying encounter with disease and degeneration -- all these invariably bring questions of faith to the fore, as they have throughout the ages. The period since the mid-1980s has been characterized by an outpouring of books on all aspects of gay spirituality, from the theological justifications for same-sex marriages to collections of essays on the religious experience of gay men, to say nothing of those works dealing with the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by AIDS. It is as if AIDS was our very own road to Damascus, if I can be permitted a queer twist on St. Paul.

One obvious fact (perhaps it is overly so) bears repeating here. I do not believe that this recent flowering of interest in gay spirituality would have been possible without a certain climate of acceptance brought about by the intense political struggles of recent decades. The same could be said, for example, about the emergence and mainstream acceptance of queer literature. As always, it is our defiance -- and our many strategic successes in this regard -- which have empowered us to name our experience "religious." One should also be conscious of the strong "American" content of much gay spirituality, and perhaps my status as a Canadian gives me a certain insight in this regard. I refer here not only to the normative and universal qualities of the specifically Americanized gay culture, but more importantly to that unique element in the American character, as borne out by your history, which seeks definition of experience and identity in religious or quasi-religious terms. It is a theme which I find quite interesting, but which I really am not able to pursue within the confines of this paper. Frank Browning has touched upon some of its elements.

It would be appropriate at this point to consider what is meant by gay spirituality. Very simply, I use the

term to encompass the full panoply of ways by which we make sense of the religious element in our lives, the manner in which we reflect on it and write about it, and the structures and rituals we create to express it. Mine is a classic approach to religion: that it consists of belief, myth and ritual. All spiritualities have components of these three. In the Christian tradition, spirituality refers to the unique medium or path by which individuals seek to live out their religious beliefs, either individually or as a community. Thus, while I may speak of a general gay spirituality, it would be more correct, in fact, to refer to gay "spiritualities," as there is more than one authentic way to comprehend the sacred. My definition is also a broad one. I consider as "spiritual" both the gay theological treatise and the gay historical study on religion, because both seek to place the queer experience within a legitimate spiritual context. In this sense, both seek to reclaim our religious legacy. They are therefore important building blocks of our spiritual heritage.

And now, to the ordering matter at hand. Given the context which I have described in these preceding paragraphs, I would propose a four-dimensional typology of gay spirituality. I have tentatively labelled these four types as follows: 1. the apologetic, 2. the therapeutic, 3. the ecological, and 4. the biographical. Each word is first and foremost descriptive: it refers to the tradition or discourse from which each type stems or to which it lays claim. In another sense, the labels also suggest what each type is meant to accomplish, to do. Needless to say, as with all such neatly and nicely compartmentalized categories, there is much fluidity amongst them. I have cast my net fairly widely. I would like to encompass gay spirituality at its most diverse. I am also intensely conscious of the inherent contradictions of such an enterprise. My categories are conceivably no more than conjectures, if perhaps not those of a guilty bystander.

I have called my first type the apologetic. Please understand that I am not implying a negative value judgement here. I use the term "apologetic" in its theological sense of "reasoned defence." From this, it should be clear what the apologetic type of gay spirituality is meant to describe. It refers to that particular form of theological or historical discourse which seeks to interpret or re-interpret traditionally negative

religious teachings on homosexuality -- particularly those from the Judeo-Christian tradition -- in a more gay-positive fashion. It is not simply reactive, however. In fact, studies which uncover and reclaim hidden elements of our religious inheritance as a community are equally important in this regard. What distinguishes the apologetic type from others is the notion of "defence," i.e., the attempt to provide alternate or correct interpretations of our experience in light of religious teaching, and vice versa. Very often, this will take the form of an exegesis of certain problematic or downright injurious passages from the Judeo-Christian scriptures -- the famous excerpt from Genesis on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah perhaps being the best case-in-point. Other characteristics of the apologetic type include a concern with high standards of academic research and a core belief that religion has somehow been "manipulated" to work against gays and lesbians (thereby adopting what I perceive as a certain optimism and perhaps naïveté vis-à-vis religious intolerance). Though I hesitate to use the word "revisionist" in this context, given that it is such a loaded term, we need to ask ourselves whether this is not also a trait of this form of gay spirituality. Among those authors whose writings I would define as apologetic, John Boswell and John McNeill are pre-eminent, though the latter also espouses a decidedly therapeutic perspective. Others working within this tradition would be Peter Gomes and Robert Goss.

I would submit that the apologetic type of gay spirituality is foundational in terms of the others. By this I mean that only a scholarly rigorous analysis of our history -- and of the ways in which organized religion has treated us -- can provide the groundwork necessary for the elaboration of our theology and our spirituality. The other types -- the therapeutic, the ecological and the biographical -- must be grounded in the gay experience of history and of its vicissitudes for them to acquire meaning and purpose. I am aware of a slightly old-fashioned Marxist bent here. I can only beg your indulgence.

The second type is the therapeutic. It is perhaps, in many ways, the most easily understood in that it is the

closest to lived experience. The therapeutic type of gay spirituality, as would be expected, seeks to place the individual experience of being gay in a positive, legitimate, celebratory and psychologically healthy context. What the apologetic type does for us as a community, the therapeutic type does for us as distinct individuals. Its message is unequivocally clear: the godhead created sexuality in its variety of forms, and what is created is good; as a gay person, you are good. One should not underestimate the power and impact of such a message. It addresses -- and redresses -- the very painful experience of self-hatred and rejection which is still the lot of too many gay men, hence its attractiveness. We are all aware, of course, of the close affinities between religion and therapy, and how each can function in similar ways at the level of the individual psyche. A spirituality which bridges the two can be quite effective in providing a sense of wholeness and "redemption" to the injured person. It is precisely this "salvation motif" which is the predominant theme of the therapeutic type of gay spirituality. I would also submit that this same message of salvation or redemption echos quite forcefully throughout all of gay spirituality.

The therapeutic type provides a most interesting context for the subversion of traditionally negative psychoanalytic views on homosexuality, effectively by means of a process of reappropriation of the very language of psychoanalysis. It is also decidedly more Jungian than Freudian in its approach, concerned with archetypes and symbols. In this regard, one must acknowledge its debt to many of the West Coast-based therapeutic movements which emerged in the 1970s, and which continue to exert measured influence. Among those writing in the gay therapeutic tradition are John McNeill again, who combines a theological approach with a psychoanalytic one, and John Fortunato.

I now come to the third type, which is the ecological. It is the most all-encompassing category, and the one most difficult to circumscribe. It includes some major writers: Harry Hay, Will Roscoe, J. Michael Clark, Daniel T. Spencer and Ronald Long. So, I shall proceed with caution. The three most striking

features of the ecological type of gay spirituality are its strong theological flavour, its eclecticism, and, of course, its ecological imagery and discourse. Several of those writing within this perspective borrow quite freely and deliberately from both the traditions of feminism and liberation theology. Its most significant characteristic, however, is its predominant and deep concern with the ecological notion of "right relation," with the interconnections between queer theory and eco-feminism, and with the manner in which gay men must relate to nature and draw sustenance from it. Fundamentally, these are ethical issues and questions.

The theology of this form of gay spirituality remains fundamentally an earth-based one, understood in its broadest sense of both the natural world and the human community. In fact, these two elements are considered inseparable one from the other; there is an organic unity between them. One of its central motifs is that of liberation -- not only for gays and lesbians, but for all other persons and creatures who share this planet. There is an interesting gamut of approaches within the ecological type. It stretches from the radical pantheism and separatism of Harry Hay and the Radical Faeries, through the Native American androgyny of Will Roscoe and the sacred hedonism of Ron Long, to the eco-feminism of Daniel Spencer and the bleak existential theology of a Michael Clark. While these may appear almost irreconcilable in outlook, I would argue that there is a significant commonality present here. Each thinker is concerned first and foremost with the quality of the gay presence in the world, with the positive rapports which gay men can establish, as individuals and as a community, with the natural and social worlds, and with the unique or special gay "vocation" or calling which flows from this. This is the meaning of the notion of "right relation." I also want to point out the importance of the androgynous theme -- certainly present in Hay and Roscoe and, to a lesser extent, Long and Spencer. This would seem to be an aspect of the quest for "right relation," for the unity of difference and the special holiness of the body.

The ecological type of gay spirituality is the one which comes closest to a systematic theology of sorts. By raising the kinds of issues referred to above, this form of spirituality seeks to address some fundamental

philosophical questions of meaning in a consistent, deliberate manner. As compared with the apologetic and therapeutic types, both of which are more reductive in approach, the ecological type is holistic in its perspective, in that it brings together in a cohesive system a variety of disparate and often apparently contradictory elements. In this, it can properly claim a pre-eminent place amongst gay spiritualities.

My fourth and final type is the biographical. As the word itself indicates, it is a spirituality which has its roots in the lived religious experience of gay men and their reflection upon it. It is also a spirituality which mirrors, in many important ways, our struggle with the ordeal of AIDS. It is personal in nature, very often focused on one's religious upbringing, and concerned with the integration of this heritage in terms of one's psychological balance. There is a certain "coming of age" quality about it. I believe this form of gay spirituality has blossomed at this particular time for two reasons: first, the existential fears emerging from the visceral struggle with AIDS raise intense questions of meaning; and second, greater mainstream acceptance of the gay experience invariably makes it possible for us to re-position ourselves vis-à-vis our individual religious inheritance. Authors such as Malcolm Boyd and Andrew Sullivan, among others, write within the biographical tradition.

Spiritual biography holds an esteemed place in most religious traditions. In the Catholic context, one need only think of the writings of Augustine, Ignatius of Loyola or Thérèse de Lisieux to understand the intimate connection between spiritual development and biographical self-disclosure. While I am not suggesting any close textual affinities between the writings of these Catholic saints and the somewhat less pious spiritual transcriptions of contemporary gay men, at the functional level they share a similar purpose. Essentially, they both seek to explore and reveal the workings of faith -- of the spirit -- in human lives. In doing so, these writings serve a dual purpose: they deepen self-understanding, but they also serve as exemplary models. In a sense, they provide the archetypal reference points without which any true spirituality becomes intellectually and morally stagnant. I would submit that for the majority of gay men, it is these personal stories of religious struggle which hold the power to move and to inspire.

I argued earlier that gay spirituality arose in a context of oppression, and that it represents a continuing effort on the part of gay men to neutralize the religious discourse of exclusion and to fashion a sacred space and a sacred language proper to us. I have suggested that gay writers have generally approached the problem of the sacred in our lives in one of four ways: by providing counter-interpretations of commonly accepted facts (the apologetic mode), by offering paradigms of positive psycho-spiritual health (the therapeutic mode), by suggesting ethical parameters for our relations with the world and with each other (the ecological mode), and by reflecting critically on our personal religious upbringing and experience (the biographical mode). We now need to ask ourselves in what way these particular modes or types might constitute a uniquely gay response to the ever-present problem of theodicy.

If you step back and look at my four types from a distance, you will perceive a certain continuum at play. I would suggest that it unfolds in the following sequence: from the biographical, to the therapeutic, to the ecological, to the apologetic. In other words, our spirituality moves from the inside to the outside: from the most intensely personal and intimate (our biographies and our psyches) to the most explicitly public and historical (our relations and our generations). What is striking about gay spirituality, I would submit, is its all-encompassing nature: how it tries to deal with our oppression from every possible angle, covering every contingency as it were. Gay spirituality certainly does not shy from the challenge posed by theodicy. Our oppression was, is and will, I believe, continue to be a given. In response to this, we have fashioned gods, as well as religious ways of being and modes of thought, which are characterized by their totality -- almost as if we wanted no part of our lives to remain exposed or vulnerable. Not only is this admirable; it is a question of basic survival for us as individuals and as a community.

In reflecting upon this fourfold typology and my somewhat cursory presentation of it, I am aware of a significant methodological problem which I have perhaps ignored at my own peril. You will note that my presentation is concerned exclusively with writers of gay spirituality -- historians, theologians, therapists

and other gay intellectuals. My paper does not really deal with "lived" gay spirituality or religiosity, i.e., with the variety of ways -- institutional or not -- by which, as gay men, we express our faith and our beliefs. I admit this is a major drawback, or perhaps it is simply a topic for another paper. Either way, it needs to be clearly stated that I do not believe that spirituality is only limited to what people say or write about their religious experience. Strictly speaking, this is theology. Genuine spirituality is much broader, and a comprehensive paper on gay spirituality would need to discuss such uniquely important forms of gay religious expression as the Metropolitan Community Church and the Radical Faeries movement, to name only two of the more meaningful examples.

In earlier papers, I touched upon some of the central religious themes of gay spirituality and how they echo the vision or language of more established (and conservative) religious world-views, notably the Christian one. I was hoping to repeat some of this discussion here, but realized that time did not permit it. In reading between the lines of what I have said above, however, you may have picked up on some of these elements: the salvation or redemption motif, the notion of calling or vocation, the theme of human liberation, to name only three. What needs to be emphasized, in conclusion, is that gay spirituality, as with other cultural forms of discourse, does not operate in a vacuum. It borrows intentionally or not, significantly or not, from what already exists in human society -- in this case, from the religious sphere. We should not think that gay spirituality is something fundamentally and radically new. It is not. Its theological world-view is the legacy of what has come before. What is new and exciting, however, is that the outcast, the pervert, has now entered the holy of holies, and has dared to call his god queer. And of that, we can certainly be justifiably proud.